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ROMNEY FILES LEGISLATION TO PROTECT STATE'S OCEAN WATERS

Seeks expanded state authority to impose zoning and avoid unplanned development



CENTERVILLE – Governor Mitt Romney today filed pioneering legislation that will make Massachusetts the first state in the nation to put in place a comprehensive statewide planning process to assess new projects proposed for state ocean waters.

Romney noted the critical need to safeguard the state's coastal waters from unregulated new uses, saying that recent proposals off Massachusetts waters have revealed significant gaps in state and federal authority to permit offshore uses and lease

open space.

“Right now, our ocean waters are vulnerable to unplanned development. We want to avoid a Wild West shootout, where projects are permitted on a ‘first come, first served’ basis,” said Romney. “The only way to protect our beautiful ocean environment is with comprehensive ocean zoning reform.”

To advise him on effective ways to update state environmental regulations to meet the challenges posed by new ocean uses, Romney created an ocean management task force in 2003 comprised of a broad range of stakeholders, including environmental groups, regulators and the fishing industry. The legislation filed today reflects the panel's recommendations.

The Governor's legislation, which he unveiled on the shores of Nantucket Sound, authorizes the Secretary of Environmental Affairs to prepare and adopt an ocean management plan within the next

two years that ensures coordination among state programs that govern offshore development and ocean protection.

The plan will define acceptable uses for specific zones of the Bay State's coastal waters, which extend three miles offshore along the state's more than 1,500 miles of coast. It will also improve the state's ability to coordinate with the federal government for projects that occur in federal waters that impact the state. Before the final plan is adopted, it will be subject to a public notice and comment period, including one or more public meetings.

"The coastal waters of Massachusetts have historically been a vital resource both economically and culturally to the citizens of the Commonwealth," said state Senator Bruce Tarr, who served on the task force. "Proper long-term planning is imperative to ensure continued vitality, at the same time maximizing economic opportunities from our fisheries and providing for sustainability for future generations."

"The current ocean management framework is an outdated, shortsighted approach using data that is sketchy at best," said Environmental Affairs Secretary Ellen Herzfelder. "Massachusetts is once again leading the nation in our efforts to manage our state's ocean resources in a proactive manner."

In addition, the legislation:

- Allows the state to address activities in adjacent federal waters to the maximum extent consistent with federal law; and
- Exempts certain activities, such as fishing, hunting and navigation as well as beach nourishment and channel and shore protection measures, from the plan's restrictions.

"We need to develop a reasonable public policy and law governing offshore development," said Susan Nickerson, Executive Director for the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound.

"The Massachusetts Audubon Society thinks the Governor's bill is a step in the right direction and looks forward to working with Governor Romney and the Legislature to get comprehensive ocean legislation adopted this session," said Jack Clarke, Director of Advocacy for MassAudubon and a member of the task force.

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